

ST. MARY'S BENEFICIAL
SOCIETY HALL
14825 Pratt Street at Main
Upper Marlboro
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS NO. MD-1044

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. MARY'S BENEFICIAL SOCIETY HALL

HABS NO. MD-1044

Location: 14825 Pratt Street (at Main Street), Upper Marlboro, Prince George's County, Maryland

Present Owner: H.C.B. Clagett, et al.

Present Use: Law offices

Significance: Built in 1892, for nearly a century this building was the center for charitable, social, religious, and political activities of the black Catholic community of Upper Marlboro.

Description: This is a one-story, one-bay-by-four-bay, german-sided, frame building with a gable-front roof. The only bay at the front elevation is the central, double-door entryway, with a three-light transom. A low-hipped-roofed porch, supported by chamfered posts, runs the length of the facade. To one side of the entry, under the porch, is a box office, added in the 1940s (with a ticket window at the side). The windows at the side elevations are six-over-six-light-sash, with shutters. The low-pitched, gable-front roof has a returned box cornice and is covered with asphalt shingles. There is a shed-roofed bathroom addition to the rear (also added in the 1940s) with an entryway and stoop at the side elevation. The interior has been remodeled for use as law offices.

History: St. Mary's Beneficial Society Hall is among the few survivors of the buildings constructed to house charitable organizations created for the benefit of the black communities of the county. Beneficial societies such as St. Mary's flourished throughout the county during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. They were a outcome of the Freedmen's Bureau, established by an act of Congress in 1865 to help newly emancipated slaves become self-sufficient. This was accomplished locally through community centers such as this one. Members, who paid dues, would receive benefits for prolonged sickness and death, insurance seldom available to blacks.

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The organization of the St. Mary's Beneficial Society was led by William A. Rhoder, a (white) parishioner of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. Rhoder, the son of German immigrants, worked as a salesman in one of the local stores. He was instrumental in preparing the constitution and by-laws of the society, and helping to set up management through its 14-officer board (Pearl).

St. Mary's Beneficial Society Hall also served as the meeting place of the county's black Republican party during the late 19th- and early 20th-century. With the passage of the 15th amendment in March of 1870, which guaranteed blacks the right to vote, Republicans in Maryland began actively recruiting freedmen. Although participation was tightly controlled, it marked the beginning of active participation by blacks in the political process. By 1893, black men constituted one-third of the vote county-wide, and outnumbered the white voters in Upper Marlboro and Queen Anne districts. The black voters were therefore responsible for the rise of the Republican party, with St. Mary's Beneficial Society Hall as the meeting place for blacks and whites from the two districts. In October of 1898, the Republican County Convention was held here (Floyd, p. 60-67).

St. Mary's Beneficial Society Hall is also the sole survivor of a group stores and residences, dating from ca. 1850-1930, which stood along Pratt Street. The building has recently undergone restoration/renovation for use as a law office.

Sources:

Floyd, Bianca P. Records & Recollections; Early Black History in Prince George's County, Maryland. M-NCPPC, Prince George's County, History Division, 1989.

Pearl, Susan G. (PG Co. HPC) Maryland Historical Trust, State Historic Sites Inventory Form, St. Mary's Beneficial Society Hall, prepared July 1987.

Historian:

Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS
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